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Being better than others but otherwise perfectly normal: Perceptions of uniqueness and similarity in close relationships

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Abstract
The current research addresses individuals' self-generated thoughts regarding their own and others' relationships, examining the ways in which perceptions of uniqueness and similarity are manifested in judgments regarding own and others' responses to dissatisfying incidents. Consistent with the uniqueness bias, participants characterized their own relationships by a greater number of constructive responses and a smaller number of destructive responses relative to characterizations of others' relationships. Moreover, external raters judged own constructive responses to be more constructive than others' constructive responses. Consistent with the similarity bias, external raters judged items describing others' responses to be less frequently occurring and more extreme than their own responses. Also, this research revealed support for the claim that the similarity bias is more pronounced for destructive responses than for constructive responses. A recall task corroborated these findings, revealing very good recall for destructive responses enacted by others and poor recall for destructive responses enacted by oneself.

Virtually all relationships eventually are confronted with periodic declines in satisfaction—declines caused by relatively enduring disagreements, conflicts, or unpleasant events that are external to the relationship itself. Individuals may respond in a variety of ways to such dissatisfying incidents. Broadly conceived, such responses may be construed as either constructive or destructive in that they either contribute to the health and vitality of the relationship or are harmful to the well-being of the relationship (cf. Clark & Reis, 1988; Holmes & Boon, 1990; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). How do individuals perceive their constructive and destructive responses to such incidents? How do individuals think about their own reactions in relation to the behavior of other individuals? And given that destructive responses are potentially detrimental to the health and stability of a relationship, how do individuals interpret and perhaps justify their destructive actions?

The current research seeks to understand the nature of the beliefs that individuals hold regarding relationship functioning,

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examining the nature of individuals' self-generated thoughts regarding their own and others' constructive and destructive responses to dissatisfying incidents. On the basis of the research regarding social judgment and social comparison, we propose that individuals' beliefs regarding their own and others' relationship functioning will reflect two relatively pervasive tendencies: (a) *uniqueness bias*, or a tendency to overestimate one's own uniqueness, exaggerating the superiority of one's own reactions and behaviors, and (b) *similarity bias*, or a tendency to overestimate the similarity between oneself and others, exaggerating the commonness or "everydayness" of one's own reactions and behaviors. This framework assumes that these two seemingly contradictory beliefs—uniqueness and similarity—coexist and that these biases serve the function of sustaining the general, self-enhancing belief that one is "uniquely better than others but otherwise perfectly normal."

The current work extends prior research in several ways. First, the uniqueness and similarity biases are pervasive tendencies that have been demonstrated to exist in a variety of judgment domains (e.g., in research on "perceived superiority" and "false consensus"; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977; Marks & Miller, 1987; Wood, 1989).[1] However, nearly all studies have focused on *either* the uniqueness bias *or* the similarity bias, thereby largely overlooking the possibility that by examining such biases in concert we may illuminate our understanding of the nature of self–other perception (however, see Campbell, 1986; Marks, 1984; McFarland & Miller, 1990).

Second, prior research on close relationships has examined issues such as perceived (and actual) similarity and uniqueness between partners in a relationship (self–other perceptions *within* a relationship; e.g., Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; for a review, see Sillars & Scott, 1983). However, very few studies have examined individuals' beliefs regarding their own functioning in relation to others involved in other relationships, capturing aspects of self–other perceptions *among* relationships. We suggest that, in addition to the uniqueness bias, the similarity bias underlies such perceptions, particularly for those responses that are potentially harmful to health and vitality of a relationship. If true, such self–other perceptions may help understand why partners may sometimes persist in particular types of responses (e.g., a reluctance to talk things over), in that they may genuinely believe (and to some degree overestimate) that their own responses are very common, frequently occurring, and therefore appropriate (e.g., "Like others, I do not talk about every slight problem we have").

Finally, as noted by Berscheid (1994, p. 84), "Relationships researchers are beginning to take advantage of the theoretical and empirical fruits of social cognition to further their understanding of interpersonal relationships. . . . Thus the rapprochement that has begun between the fields of social cognition and interpersonal relationships has the potential to benefit both endeavors."

1. Throughout this article we will employ the concepts of "uniqueness bias" and "similarity bias" to refer to beliefs that are also known as "perceived superiority" (e.g., Wood, 1989) and "false consensus" (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). While common language would suggest that the uniqueness bias includes a tendency to regard oneself as distinctly inferior to others, it should be clear that this bias is defined as the tendency to regard oneself as distinctly superior to others. The primary reason for employing the concepts of uniqueness bias and similarity bias is that these concepts (a) explicate the contradictory nature of these beliefs, (b) do not seem to be domain-specific, and (c) have been employed in prior research that has examined simultaneously *both* beliefs (e.g., Campbell, 1986; Goethals et al., 1991). In contrast, the concepts of superiority and consensus seem less contradictory and could be construed as relatively more domain-specific, with superiority primarily applying to attributes that are universally appreciated (ability, morality) or universally depreciated (e.g., lack of ability, lack of morality), and with consensus applying to attributes that are not universally appreciated or universally depreciated (e.g., opinions and preferences). As will be outlined, the current research focuses on a domain that presumably includes both types of attributes.

By examining self–other perceptions in the context of close relationships, we attempt to enhance the linkage between the areas of social judgment and close relationships.

Perceptions of Uniqueness and Similarity in Close Relationships

Past research has consistently revealed that individuals are not always accurate and unbiased in perceiving social reality, particularly when this reality has implications for the self or close others. One pervasive tendency has been termed the *uniqueness bias* (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991), in reference to the inclination to overestimate the superiority of one's behavior and characteristics (e.g., perceptions of superiority regarding one's fairness, generosity, and ability; Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; Van Lange, 1991). An equally pervasive tendency has been termed the *similarity bias*, in reference to the inclination to overestimate the commonness of one's reactions, opinions, and beliefs (e.g., judgments of President Carter's performance; whether to close curtains on winter nights; Goethals, Allison, & Frost, 1979; Van der Pligt, 1984). As outlined by Ross et al. (1977, p. 280), "Individuals tend to see their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common and appropriate to existing circumstances, while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant or inappropriate." While these biased perceptions typically have been examined in two separate lines of research, it seems plausible that both biases—seemingly contradictory—underlie beliefs regarding one's own and others' relationships. How can it be that individuals regard themselves as both unique and similar to others?

A fair amount of evidence suggests that it may be functional to maintain a relatively favorable view of one's own actions. As outlined by Taylor and Brown (1988, 1994), self-enhancing views may stimulate feelings of happiness and contentment, the ability to care for and about others, and the capacity for creative, productive work. In the context of relationship functioning, it may be adaptive to regard one's behavior in relatively favorable terms by viewing one's own actions and responses as quite positive, reasonable, and appropriate. The prominence of such favorable beliefs may promote feelings of self-worth and happiness, provide validation of the quality of one's relationship, and enhance perceptions that presumably are relevant—and perhaps necessary—to sustaining a relationship (e.g., feelings of trust, security, and optimism; Holmes & Boon, 1990; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

From a functional perspective, it has been argued that uniqueness and similarity biases are differentially functional depending on whether the attribute at issue is a universally evaluated one (that is, people exhibit good agreement about whether the attribute is desirable or undesirable) or a variably evaluated one (that is, people disagree about whether the attribute is desirable, and rate their own position on the attribute dimension most positively; Sherman, Chassin, Presson, & Agostinelli, 1984). For universally evaluated attributes, uniqueness and similarity judgments should depend on the desirability of one's own position. Individuals should assume uniqueness when they regard their standing on the attribute dimension as more desirable (e.g., "Unlike others, I never lie to my partner") and should assume similarity when they regard their standing as undesirable (e.g., "Like most others, I become irritated when I have to wait for my partner"). For variably evaluated attributes, individuals should be motivated to seek similarity because such beliefs provide "consensual validation," indicating the appropriateness, "reasonableness," and correctness of one's own position (e.g., "Like most other people, we eat dinner around 6:00 P.M."; Campbell, 1986; Goethals et al., 1979).

With the possible exceptions of individual abilities and some opinions, many behaviors and attitudes relevant to understanding ongoing relationships may entail a combination of universally and variably evaluated attributes. That is, most such behaviors have evaluative meaning (e.g., to

sacrifice for the sake of the partner is good), but at the same time, the most extreme form of the behavior presumably is not the most desirable form (e.g., too much sacrifice is not good), and individuals may disagree about the specific form of the behavior that is most desirable (cf. Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994; Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997). Accordingly, we assume that responses to dissatisfying incidents in relationships have both a universally evaluated component (i.e., behaving constructively is better than behaving destructively) and a variably evaluated component.

The above characterization of constructive and destructive responses to incidents of dissatisfaction suggests the functionality of both the uniqueness bias and the similarity bias. First, the uniqueness bias, or the tendency to regard one's responses as more constructive and less destructive than those of others, resembles perceived superiority regarding relationship functioning. Second, the similarity bias, or regarding one's responses as common and not extreme or deviant, provides consensual validation for the appropriateness of own relationship functioning. Third, it seems reasonable to assume that relative to constructive responses, individuals should feel a stronger need to explain or justify their destructive responses, in that such responses are potentially harmful to the health and vitality of a relationship and because such responses may be discrepant with a favorable image of the self (i.e., "I do something that could be construed as 'bad'"). How, then, might individuals justify such behavior? We propose that individuals tend to justify their destructive responses by viewing such responses as relatively common and appropriate to existing circumstances, a perception that provides validation for the correctness or appropriateness of one's behavior (cf. Goethals et al., 1979; Marks & Miller, 1987). Given that there should be a stronger motivation to justify one's destructive responses than one's constructive responses, individuals should assume greater similarity for their destructive responses than for their constructive responses.

Study 1

Study 1 examines self-generated thoughts regarding one's own and others' relationships, asking participants to list constructive and destructive responses that are believed to be performed relatively more frequently by either self or others. Also, the present study asks participants to compare themselves with same-sex others (as opposed to nonspecified others in Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995), forcing individuals to relate their responses to what is believed to be an important reference group in the context of close relationships (cf. Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; Peplau, 1983).

Following the uniqueness bias, we expected to replicate the findings of Van Lange and Rusbult (1995) and predicted that (a) participants will list a greater number of constructive responses for their own relationships than for others' relationships ("being better than others," cf. positive superiority; Hypothesis 1a); and (b) participants will list fewer destructive responses for their own relationships than for others' relationships ("being not as bad as others," cf. negative superiority; Hypothesis 1b). Finally, we are interested in exploring possible gender effects, particularly the tendency of women rather than men to hold a greater number of negative beliefs about others' relationships, as observed in several studies reported by Van Lange and Rusbult (1995).

Method

Participants. One hundred five individuals who were involved in an ongoing relationship participated in Study 1 (57 women, 47 men, and 1 individual who failed to indicate gender). Participants were recruited at a variety of locations on the campus of the Free University at Amsterdam, including the university cafeteria and library. Participants were 23.95 years old on average (23.35 for women, 24.68 years for men), and their relationships were an average of 32.46 months in duration (33.02 for women, 31.79 months for men). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental

conditions, with approximately equal numbers of women and men in each condition.

Procedure. The experiment was described as a study of romantic relationships. Participants were told that the experiment would last about 15 minutes, and were assured that their individual responses would remain strictly anonymous. Participants were asked to list the behaviors that came to mind in thinking about responses to incidents of dissatisfaction in their own and others' relationships. *Item Valence* was manipulated by asking half of the participants to list constructive responses and asking the other half to list destructive responses. *Order of Tasks* was also varied: Half of the participants began by listing behaviors that they performed more frequently than did other individuals, and then listed behaviors others enacted more frequently than they themselves did; the other half of the participants listed "other" behaviors prior to listing "own" behaviors. In addition, *Instructional Set* was varied: Half of the participants listed responses that were more characteristic of their own relationships than that of others' relationships (i.e., focus of comparison was on self, or one's own relationship), and half listed responses that were less characteristic of others' relationships than that of their own relationships (i.e., focus of comparison was on others). The analyses revealed no significant main effects or interactions involving Order of Tasks or Instructional Set, so these variables will not be described further.

In the *Constructive Item Valence, Own Item Object* condition, participants read the following instructions:

> Everyone experiences occasional dissatisfying incidents in their relationships—times when one or the other partner feels unhappy, upset, or angry about something (something the other said or did, something about the relationship itself, etc.). One may respond *constructively* to such situations, that is, respond in ways that are helpful to the future of the relationship (e.g., talking things over, changing the behavior so as to solve the problem). On the next page please list as many examples as possible of constructive behaviors that you perform more often in your relationship than other same-sex individuals do in their relationships. Use a new line for each response, and describe the behavior briefly (maximum of 12 words).[2]

Participants were given 4 minutes to list behaviors. Following this, participants were asked to rank-order the items in terms of the degree to which each item exemplified the constructive responses that they perform more frequently than do other individuals. These ratings were used to identify "the best items" for use in Study 2, which we describe later. Participants were instructed to rank-order the items by assigning numbers to each behavior, assigning a "1" to the best example, assigning a "2" to the second best example, and so on. They were asked not to assign the same rank to two items (i.e., no ties). Next, participants were asked to generate as many examples as possible of constructive responses that they perform less often than others—the *Constructive Item Valence, Other Item Object* condition. Participants also rank-ordered these items in terms of the degree to which each item exemplified the constructive responses they performed less frequently than did other individuals. As noted earlier, Order of Tasks and Instructional Set were counterbalanced across participants. In the *Destructive Item Valence* conditions the instructions were identical, except for the substitution of "One may respond *destructively* to such situations, that is, respond in ways that are harmful to the future of the

2. To assist participants in generating items, the instructions employed prompts that paralleled those used in research by Van Lange and Rusbult (1995; Experiment 1). This research revealed that the presence versus absence of such prompts (i.e., a comparison of Experiments 1 and 2) did not affect (a) the number of items generated, or (b) the perceived constructiveness of the self-generated items in each category. At the same time, we cannot exclude the possibility that such prompts affect other features of the items that participants generated (e.g., the extremity and frequency of the responses).

relationship (e.g., avoiding the problem, suggesting ending the relationship)."

Results and discussion

The number of items generated by participants was analyzed in a 2 (Item Valence: Constructive vs. Destructive responses) by 2 (Item Object: Own vs. Other responses) by 2 (Gender of Participant: Women vs. Men) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with Item Object represented as a within-subject variable. Relevant to the predicted positive and negative superiority effects, this analysis revealed a significant interaction of Item Valence and Item Object, $F(1,100) = 28.32$, $p < .001$. Follow-up tests of simple effects revealed that (a) individuals listed a greater number of constructive responses for themselves, $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.43$, than for others, $M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.42$; $F(1,53) = 4.44$, $p < .05$, supporting Hypothesis 1a (i.e., positive superiority), and (b) individuals listed fewer destructive responses for themselves, $M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.49$, than for others, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 2.58$; $F(1,49) = 25.39$, $p < .001$, supporting Hypothesis 1b (i.e., negative superiority). There was also a significant main effect of Item Object, $F(1,100) = 6.94$, $p < .01$, with individuals listing a greater number of responses for others ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.73$) than for themselves ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.49$). No other main effects or interactions were statistically significant. Thus, relative to their characterizations of others' relationships, participants characterized their own relationship by a greater number of constructive items and a smaller number of destructive items. This supports the uniqueness bias.

Study 2

Study 2 is designed to provide preliminary evidence relevant to the claim that individuals simultaneously exhibit uniqueness and similarity biases, and that the similarity bias is relatively more pronounced for destructive responses than for constructive responses. In Study 2 we employ a random selection of self-generated responses from Study 1 participants and ask a new set of participants to rate the responses in terms of constructiveness (ratings relevant to the uniqueness bias), as well as frequency and extremity (ratings relevant to the similarity bias). Moreover, we ask participants whether they perform each response more or less frequently than others (these judgments will be referred to as beliefs regarding *self–other prevalence*).

The goal of Study 2 is twofold. First, given that participants in Study 2 did not generate the items they are asked to rate, these participants serve as *external and blind judges* of the constructive and destructive items (i.e., two levels of a factor we label Item Valence) generated by Study 1 participants as typical of self versus others (i.e., two levels of a factor we label Item Object). Thus, these external judges serve to illuminate the nature of the constructive and destructive responses ascribed to self and others (i.e., for the sake of clarity, we refer to these ratings as *external judgments*).

Second, because we examine beliefs regarding self–other prevalence of the responses, Study 2 allows us to identify the major predictors of such judgments (i.e., perceptions of constructiveness/destructiveness, frequency, and extremity). Thus, these judgments serve to identify what it is about constructive and destructive responses that leads Study 2 participants to conclude whether they themselves or others are more likely to engage in such responses (i.e., for the sake of clarity, we refer to these ratings as *self-relevant judgments*).

Hypotheses regarding the nature of constructive and destructive responses for self and others. The first goal of Study 2 is to assess the nature of the constructive and destructive responses for self and others by examining "external" judgments of these responses. On the basis of the foregoing discussion regarding uniqueness and similarity biases, we advanced the following hypotheses. First, consistent with the uniqueness bias, we advance two specific predictions: Hypothesis 1c predicts that own responses

will be rated as more constructive and less destructive than other responses; and Hypothesis 1d predicts that constructive responses will be rated as more frequently performed by the self than by others, whereas the opposite should occur for destructive responses.

Second, on the basis of the similarity bias, Hypothesis 2 predicts that own responses will be rated as more frequent and less extreme than other responses (i.e., a main effect of Item Object on ratings of frequency and extremity). Third, we propose that individuals will assume greater similarity for destructive responses than for constructive responses. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 predicts that the tendency to rate other responses as less frequent and more extreme than own responses will be more pronounced for destructive responses than for constructive responses (i.e., an interaction of Item Valence and Item Object for ratings of frequency and extremity).

Finally, we advance one prediction that is not directly relevant to the uniqueness and similarity biases, but that is relevant to the manner in which individuals process information about constructive and destructive behaviors. Earlier, we assumed that at the global level individuals may hold relatively positive beliefs regarding relationship functioning, and that destructive responses therefore should stand out as more extreme and less frequent than constructive responses. Accordingly, Hypothesis 4 predicts that constructive responses will be rated as less extreme and more frequent than destructive responses (i.e., a main effect of Item Valence for ratings of frequency and extremity).

Hypotheses regarding beliefs about self–other prevalence. The second goal of Study 2 is to examine the extent to which perceived constructiveness, frequency, and extremity contribute to the prediction of beliefs regarding self–other prevalence for constructive and destructive responses (i.e., these are self-relevant judgments). On the basis of the uniqueness bias, we predict that perceived constructiveness will contribute to predicting self–other prevalence (a prediction reminiscent of Hypothesis 1); on the basis of the similarity bias, we predict that perceived frequency and extremity will also contribute to predicting self–other prevalence (a prediction reminiscent of Hypothesis 2). And, on the basis of the assertion that the similarity bias is relatively more important in accounting for self–other prevalence regarding destructive responses than constructive responses, we examine whether levels of perceived frequency and extremity make greater contributions to predicting self–other prevalence for destructive responses than for constructive responses (a prediction reminiscent of Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants and design. Eighty-three students at the Free University at Amsterdam participated in Study 2 (44 women, 39 men). Participants were recruited by means of an advertisement placed in a local university paper. The advertisement invited individuals who were involved in ongoing dating relationships to participate in an experiment entitled "Interpersonal Relationships." Participants were 22.65 years old on average (22.27 years for women, 23.08 for men), and their relationships were an average of 29.68 months in duration (30.14 months for women, 29.18 months for men). Judges were paid 12.50 Dutch guilders for participation in Phase 2 (approximately $7.00 in American currency).

Forty items from Study 1 were randomly selected from the items that were rank-ordered as "best examples" (i.e., rated as number one) by Study 1 participants (10 items from each experimental condition; see Table 1). Study 2 participants made judgments of these items on three dimensions (constructiveness, frequency, and extremity). Study 2 employs a 2 (Item Valence: Items describing constructive vs. destructive responses) by 2 (Item Object: Responses performed by self vs. others) by 2 (Gender of Participant: Women vs. men)

Table 1. *Forty randomly selected responses to dissatisfaction*

Constructive Item Valence/Own Item Object
to listen to the partner
to forgive
to first carefully listen, and later express your own opinion
to discuss disagreements
to laugh about "the problem"
to consider the partner's opinion as equally important as your own
to talk about it, and to attempt to solve it
to trust one another
to talk
to directly ask what is on his or her mind
Constructive Item Valence/Other Item Object
to talk and to encourage the partner
to initiate settling the argument
to sit around the table, and talk about it
to clearly express what one feels
to ask "if there is something I can do" to make the partner feel better about himself or herself
to relieve the partner
to tolerate certain irritations about the partner
to put yourself (and your problems) aside to avoid problems
to settle the argument
to be assertive
Destructive Item Valence/Own Item Object
to be indifferent
to pretend nothing has happened
to say nothing
to be impatient
to overgeneralize the problem
to have too bad a picture of the problem: to exaggerate
to be cynical or sarcastic
to not talk about it
to doubt the current state or quality of the relationship
to scream without listening to the partner
Destructive Item Valence/Other Item Object
to not be willing or able to show understanding
to hit the partner
to avoid all problems
to fight
to not adjust to the partner
to avoid each other in some situations
to be stubborn, to never change one's own opinion
to hit each other during fights
to be jealous
to keep silent until the partner starts talking

factorial design. Item Valence and Gender are between-participant variables, and Item Object is a within-participant variable.

Procedure. As in Study 1, the instructions began with a brief introduction. Everyone experiences occasional dissatisfying incidents in their relationships—times when one or the other partner feels unhappy, upset, or angry about something (something the other said or did, something about the relationship itself, etc.). Individuals may differ in how they respond to such situations. In this experiment,

we will present a number of such responses, and will ask you to make judgments with respect to each of these responses, or behaviors.

The 40 responses listed in Table 1 (these responses are translations from Dutch into English) were randomly sampled by a non-Dutch-speaking individual who was blind to the experimental purposes and hypotheses. The first 10 randomly selected behaviors that fell into each of the four experimental conditions were included in Study 2: 10 constructive own responses, 10 constructive other responses, 10 destructive own responses, and 10 destructive other responses. Within each of the four conditions, we systematically controlled for gender of writer: The first five items in each category were generated by men and the latter five items were generated by women (see Table 1). The order in which the items were listed was randomized prior to the judgment tasks.

Participants were asked to make three types of judgment with respect to each of the 40 responses. Each judgment was performed using a 9-point scale. First, to assess beliefs regarding *self–other prevalence*, we asked participants to estimate the relative frequency with which they perform each response in comparison to same-sex others (0 = "I do this much less often in my relationship than do other same-sex individuals in their relationships"; 4 = "I do this about as often as do other same-sex individuals in their relationships"; 8 = "I do this much more often in my relationship than do other same-sex individuals in their relationships"). Second, participants made judgments with respect to *constructiveness versus destructiveness.* This task was introduced as follows: "Behaviors differ in the extent to which they positively contribute to the future of a relationship (that is, constructive behaviors) or are harmful to the future of a relationship (that is, destructive behaviors)" (0 = "extremely destructive," 4 = "neither destructive nor constructive," 8 = "extremely constructive").

Judgments of *frequency* and *extremity*—which were employed to examine the similarity bias—deserve some comment because the current scales differ from more commonly used measures of similarity. Most prior research has examined such judgments by asking participants to estimate the percentage of others who would exhibit the same (versus different) preference or perform the same (versus different) behavior as themselves (this measurement technique is most notable in research on "false consensus"; cf. Ross et al., 1977). Alternatively, such judgments have been examined by asking individuals to rate their own position along a continuous dimension, and then to ascribe a position to an individual target person (this measurement technique is most notable in research on "assumed similarity" or "attributive projection"; cf. Cameron & Margaret, 1951; Cronbach, 1955). Although such measures have been shown to be valid and useful (i.e., such measures exhibit consistent patterns across studies), we employed alternative measures so as to examine the Ross et al. (1977) claim that individuals tend to regard their own choices as relatively common, while viewing alternative responses as uncommon and deviant. Thus, our measures assess judgments of how frequently each response occurs in others' relationships, as well as the judged extremity of each response. We employed two measures to tap two overlapping but somewhat different expressions of similarity.

Judgments of frequency were obtained by asking participants to rate the frequency with which each response occurred in others' relationships, on average (not your own relationship). We included the phrase "not your own relationship" to discourage participants from basing such judgments on their own experience (cf. Alicke & Largo, 1995). Concrete anchors were included for each scale point (0 = "virtually never"; 1 = "about once a year"; 2 = "several times a year"; 3 = "about once a month"; 4 = "several times a month"; 5 = "about once a week"; 6 = "several times a week"; 7 = "about once a day"; and 8 = "virtually always, several times a day"). Global anchors were not employed because such scales leave individuals free to employ idiosyncratic norms or base rates in their fre-

quency judgments (e.g., "hitting the partner" might be judged to occur as frequently as "initiate settling the argument" owing to the application of idiosyncratic norms).[3]

Judgments of extremity were introduced by explaining that behaviors may differ in the extent to which they are extreme and salient: "That is, when you see or hear about this behavior, that you find this behavior very noticeable and extreme" (0 = "not at all extreme or salient"; 4 = "somewhat extreme or salient"; and 8 = "very extreme or salient"). We wanted to soften the potentially negative connotation of extremity by adding the word "salient"; we also assumed that the combination of extremity and salience captures the meaning of "unusual" or "deviant" (i.e., Ross et al., 1977). Words such as "appropriate" or "inappropriate" were avoided so as to discourage participants from coloring such judgments in a self-serving manner (i.e., individuals might recall their self–other prevalence ratings, and extremity judgments might be colored by self-presentation concerns).

Results and discussion

Our analyses proceeded in two stages. First, we examined the nature of the constructive and destructive responses generated by Study 1 participants as typical of self and others (i.e., *external judgments*). Second, we examined the extent to which self–other prevalence judgments by Study 2 participants can be predicted by their judgments of constructiveness, frequency, and extremity (i.e., *self-relevant judgments*).

The nature of constructive and destructive items for self and others (i.e., external judgments). Participants rated 40 responses in terms of self–other prevalence, constructiveness, frequency, and extremity. Each of these judgments was analyzed in a 2 (Item Valence: Constructive vs. Destructive responses) by 2 (Item Object: Own vs. Other responses) by 2 (Gender: Women vs. Men) analysis of variance, with Item Valence and Item Object represented as within-participant variables. Mean values for each experimental condition are presented in Table 2.

For ratings of *constructiveness versus destructiveness*, we predicted that "own responses" would be rated as more constructive and less destructive than "others' responses" (Hypothesis 1c). Indeed, the analysis revealed a main effect for Item Object, $F(1,79) = 61.36, p < .001$, with own responses ($M = 4.36, SD = .41$) being judged to be more constructive than other responses ($M = 4.02, SD = .47$). However, this main effect for Item Object was qualified by an interaction of Item Valence and Item Object, $F(1,79) = 68.56, p < .001$. Follow-up tests of simple effects revealed that own constructive responses were judged to be more constructive than were others' constructive responses (i.e., positive superiority), $F(1,80) = 133.56, p < .001$, whereas one's own destructive responses were not judged to be significantly less destructive than others' destructive responses, $F(1,81) < 1$. The analysis also revealed a significant main effect of Item Valence, $F(1,79) = 1348.01, p < .001$, which reflects the trivial finding that constructive responses ($M = 6.07, SD = .58$) were judged to be more constructive—or less destructive—than were destructive responses ($M = 2.31, SD = .63$). Finally, there was a significant 3-factor interaction of Item Valence, Item Object, and Gender, $F(1,79) = 6.67, p < .02$. Follow-up tests revealed that, compared to men, women tended to exhibit more positive judgments of their own constructive, others' constructive, and own destructive responses; women and men did not differ in their judgments of their own destructive responses.

For ratings of *frequency* and *extremity*, we anticipated that items describing others' responses would be judged to be less frequent and more extreme than items describing own responses (Hypothesis 2); we also anticipated that these tendencies would be

3. The frequency judgments emphasize how often such responses occur in others' relationships. As noted by an anonymous reviewer, such frequency judgments can be influenced by both (a) the extent to which dissatisfying events occur in others' relationships, and (b) the degree to which each event elicits this response.

Table 2. *Number of items, judgments of items, and beliefs regarding self–other prevalence as a function of item valence and item object*

	Constructive		Destructive	
Measure	Own	Other	Own	Other
Constructiveness of Responses	6.44	5.70	2.28	2.34
	(0.65)	(0.65)	(0.69)	(0.70)
Frequency of Responses	4.74	3.76	2.87	2.58
	(0.89)	(0.86)	(1.04)	(0.90)
Extremity of Responses	2.36	2.82	4.57	5.00
	(1.50)	(1.29)	(1.06)	(1.05)
Self–Other Prevalence	5.19	4.80	3.37	2.99
	(0.76)	(0.71)	(0.95)	(0.91)

Note: Higher numbers indicate greater number of responses, greater constructiveness of responses, greater frequency of responses, greater extremity of responses, and greater self–other discrepancy in the frequency with which responses are enacted. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Degrees of freedom differ somewhat owing to missing data for some dependent measures.

more pronounced for items describing destructive responses than for items describing constructive responses (Hypothesis 3). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the analyses revealed a main effect of Item Object for the frequency measure, $F(1,79) = 176.39, p < .001$, with own responses ($M = 3.80, SD = 72$) being judged to be more frequent than other responses ($M = 3.17, SD = .75$). Similarly, the analyses revealed a main effect of Item Object for the extremity measure, $F(1,81) = 81.50, p < .001$, with other responses ($M = 3.91, SD = 1.00$) being judged to be more extreme than own responses ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.06$). The results were not supportive of Hypothesis 3, which would be revealed by a significant interaction of Item Valence and Item Object. This 2-factor interaction was significant for frequency judgments, $F(1,79) = 40.17, p < .001$, but in a manner inconsistent with Hypothesis 3: There was a greater discrepancy in frequency judgments for own versus other constructive responses (discrepancy $M = 0.98$) than for own versus other destructive responses (discrepancy $M = 0.29$). The interaction of Item Valence and Item Object was not significant for extremity judgments.

Finally, we predicted that items describing constructive responses would be judged to be less extreme and more frequent than items describing destructive responses (Hypothesis 4). The main effect for Item Valence indeed was significant for judgments of frequency, $F(1,79) = 184.09, p < .001$, as well as for judgments of extremity, $F(1,81) = 250.89, p < .001$. As predicted by Hypothesis 4, constructive responses ($M = 4.25, SD = .79$) were judged to be more frequent than were destructive responses ($M = 2.72, SD = .93$), and constructive responses ($M = 2.59, SD = 1.36$) were judged to be less extreme than were destructive responses ($M = 4.78, SD = 1.00$).

For beliefs regarding *self–other prevalence,* the analysis revealed a main effect of Item Valence, $F(1,79) = 165.05, p < .001$. As predicted in Hypothesis 1d, in comparison to others, participants believed that they exhibited a greater prevalence of constructive responses ($M = 4.99, SD = .66$) than destructive responses ($M = 3.18, SD = .86$). There was also a significant main effect of Item Object, $F(1,79) = 55.64, p < .001$. Individuals reported greater self–other prevalence for "own responses" ($M = 4.28, SD = .46$) than for "others' responses" ($M = 3.89, SD = .51$). No other main effects or interactions were statistically significant.

Predicting beliefs regarding self–other prevalence (i.e., self-relevant judgments). In addition to a main effect of Item Valence, the above analyses revealed a robust main

effect of Item Object for self–other prevalence, demonstrating that participants judged "own responses" to be more characteristic of themselves than "others' responses." Own responses were also judged to be more constructive, more frequent, and less extreme than were others' responses. Thus, the main effect of Item Object for self–other prevalence may be accounted for by differences between own and others' responses in constructiveness, frequency, and/or extremity. We hypothesized that judged constructiveness, frequency, and extremity would independently contribute to predicting beliefs regarding self–other prevalence (predictions reminiscent of Hypotheses 1 and 2), and that judged frequency and extremity would contribute more powerfully to predicting self–other prevalence for destructive responses than for constructive responses (a prediction reminiscent of Hypothesis 3). To test these hypotheses, we performed a series of correlational and regression analyses.

First, for each participant we calculated mean values of each measure for each condition, collapsing across the 10 responses within each condition. Then we computed the correlations among self–other prevalence, judged constructiveness, judged frequency, and judged extremity, for each of the four categories of behaviors. As can be seen in Table 3, reported self–other prevalence was significantly positively correlated with judged constructiveness within all four experimental conditions. More interestingly, the correlations of self–other prevalence and judged frequency were marginal or nonsignificant for constructive responses, whereas these correlations were statistically significant for destructive responses. Thus, individuals appear to believe that destructive responses are more characteristic of the self to the extent that such behaviors occur more frequently.

Similarly, self–other prevalence was not significantly correlated with judged extremity for constructive responses, whereas these correlations were statistically significant for destructive responses. That is, destructive responses were regarded as more characteristic of the self to the extent that

Table 3. *Correlations among self–other prevalence and judged constructiveness, frequency, and extremity, as a function of item valence and item object*

Experimental Condition	Constructiveness	Frequency	Extremity
Own Constructive Items (N = 82)			
Self–Other Prevalence	.427**	.162^{+}	−.024
Constructiveness of Response		.242*	−.140
Frequency of Response			−.091
Other Constructive Items (N = 80)			
Self–Other Prevalence	.451**	−.031	−.134
Constructiveness of Response		.053	−.159^{+}
Frequency of Response			.161^{+}
Own Destructive Items (N = 79)			
Self–Other Prevalence	.425**	.302**	−.266**
Constructiveness of Response		.015	−.363**
Frequency of Response			.077
Other Destructive Items (N = 82)			
Self–Other Prevalence	.437**	.310**	−.260**
Constructiveness of Response		.003	−.428**
Frequency of Response			.059

Note: Statistics are based on 79 to 82 individuals. Sample sizes differ slightly across analyses owing to missing data for some measures.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. $^{+}p < .10$, marginal.

Table 4. *Multiple regression analyses predicting beliefs regarding self–other prevalence from perceived constructiveness, frequency, and extremity*

	Regression Coefficients		Overall Regression Model			
	t	*p*<	R^2	*F*	*df*	*p*<
Own Constructive Items (*N* = 82)						
Self–Other Judgments From:						
Constructiveness	3.93	.001	.19	5.99	3,78	.001
Frequency	0.62	.540				
Extremity	0.39	.702				
Other Constructive Items (*N* = 80)						
Self–Other Judgments From:						
Constructiveness	4.29	.001	.21	6.70	3,76	.001
Frequency	−0.43	.667				
Extremity	−0.53	.597				
Own Destructive Items (*N* = 79)						
Self–Other Judgments From:						
Constructiveness	3.47	.001	.29	10.20	3,75	.001
Frequency	3.16	.002				
Extremity	−1.51	.136				
Other Destructive Items (*N* = 82)						
Self–Other Judgments From:						
Constructiveness	3.69	.001	.30	10.94	3,78	.001
Frequency	3.31	.001				
Extremity	−1.07	.288				

Note: Statistics are based on 79 to 82 individuals. Sample sizes differ slightly across analyses owing to missing data for some measures.

such behaviors are less extreme. Finally, Table 3 reveals that judgments of constructiveness, frequency, and extremity were not systematically correlated, with the exception of a correlation between judged constructiveness and extremity in ratings of destructive responses. Lower levels of judged constructiveness were associated with greater judged extremity.

Next, we conducted four simultaneous regression analyses in which self–other judgments were regressed onto perceived constructiveness, frequency, and extremity, one regression being conducted for each class of responses. As can be seen in Table 4, consistent with Hypothesis 1, perceived constructiveness is a strong and robust predictor of self–other judgments of the behaviors in each category. More interestingly, perceived frequency contributed significantly to predicting self–other judgments of destructive responses, but did not make a significant contribution to predicting self–other judgments of constructive responses.[4] However, in none of the categories of behaviors did perceived extremity contribute to predicting self–other preva-

4. It is interesting to note that perceived constructiveness, frequency, and extremity accounted for about 20% of the variance in self–other prevalence ratings for constructive responses, whereas these perceptions accounted for about 30% of the variance in self–other prevalence ratings for destructive responses (see Table 4). Thus, the two-predictor model for self–other prevalence of destructive responses (i.e., perceived constructiveness and frequency) accounts for substantially more variance than does the single-predictor model for self–other prevalence of constructive responses, a finding accounted for by the interaction of perceived frequency and Item Valence.

lence judgments. The absence of such effects for destructive responses, at least in part, may be due to multicollinearity between perceived constructiveness and extremity, in that extremity exhibited substantial (negative) correlations with both self–other prevalence judgments and perceived constructiveness of destructive responses. These correlations suggest that extremity judgments tended to have a negative connotation.[5]

Thus, consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, self–other prevalence of *destructive* responses can best be understood by taking into account the extent to which individuals regard a given response as constructive and frequently occurring. However, self–other prevalence of *constructive* responses can be parsimoniously predicted by level of perceived constructiveness, supporting Hypothesis 1 but disconfirming Hypothesis 2. The overall pattern does provide good evidence in support of the claim that perceived frequency makes a stronger contribution to predicting self–other prevalence regarding destructive responses than for constructive responses (Hypothesis 3). This finding is consistent with the more general proposition that individuals assume uniqueness for constructive responses, and uniqueness *and* similarity for destructive responses.

5. Finally, we performed simultaneous regression analyses for each item in the list, regressing self–other prevalence onto perceived constructiveness, frequency, and extremity. The results were in agreement with the above findings. In regressions predicting self–other prevalence of constructive responses, perceived constructiveness exhibited significant regression coefficients in 15 of 20 analyses (plus 3 marginal effects), perceived frequency exhibited significant coefficients in 3 analyses (plus 2 marginal effects), and perceived extremity exhibited no significant coefficients (only 1 effect was marginal). However, in regressions predicting self–other prevalence of destructive responses, perceived constructiveness exhibited significant coefficients in 9 of 20 analyses (plus 2 marginal effects), perceived frequency exhibited significant coefficients in 12 analyses (plus 1 marginal effect), and perceived extremity exhibited significant coefficients in 3 analyses (plus 1 marginal effect).

Study 3

The goal of Study 3 is to explore individuals' recall of constructive and destructive responses ascribed to self or others by Study 1 participants. Such recall is important because it might illuminate the processes by which individuals develop and sustain the general belief that their own relationships are better than others' relationships but otherwise perfectly normal. Conversely, it is plausible that such (presumably stable) beliefs about our own and others' relationships affect the ways in which we attend to and ultimately recall new information about own and others' relationships. Accordingly, we generally expected selective recall of information regarding constructive and destructive responses that Study 1 participants listed as characteristic of their own versus others' relationships.

Because negative behaviors typically tend to receive greater weight and attention than do positive behaviors, one might assume that these responses will also be better recalled. Indeed, some evidence supports this reasoning—in particular, there is evidence for a tendency to recall information that is incongruent with one's general beliefs or expectations (e.g., Hastie & Kumar, 1979; Srull, 1981). However, evidence also indicates greater recall of positive rather than negative information. Although several explanations of such findings have been advanced, it seems plausible that positive information may be better recalled because positive information presumably is more self-relevant or because there are greater possibilities for interpreting such behavior in light of other positive information (e.g., positive information is consistent with a favorable schema about the self; cf. Markus, 1977; Taylor, 1991).

A recent meta-analysis by Stangor and McMillan (1992) suggests the importance of several moderating variables, including the strength of expectancy and the delay between exposure to stimulus and recall task. For example, memory for expectancy-

incongruent information tends to be greater when the expectancy is weak and when the time between exposure and recall is small. The current research focuses on responses that may be quite common overall. The responses are generated by comparable participants (i.e., Study 1 participants), and participants presumably have acquired a fair amount of experience with constructive and destructive behavior in relationships. Moreover, the delay between exposure and recall task was small. In light of these features of the current research, we assume greater recall for information that is incongruent with expectations and thus propose greater recall for uncommon, infrequent responses than for common, frequent responses.

Accordingly, we advanced three hypotheses that parallel earlier predictions (i.e., Hypotheses 2 through 4). Specifically, assuming that others' responses are regarded as less common than one's own responses, we predict greater recall for other responses than for own responses (i.e., paralleling Hypothesis 2, we predict a main effect of Item Object). Also, assuming that differences in the commonness of own and other responses will be more pronounced for destructive responses rather than for constructive responses, we predict that differences in recall will be relatively more pronounced for own destructive responses than for others' destructive responses (i.e., paralleling Hypothesis 3, we predict an interaction of Item Valence and Item Object). Finally, assuming that destructive responses are less common than constructive responses, we predict greater recall for destructive rather than for constructive responses (i.e., paralleling Hypothesis 4, we predict a main effect of Item Valence).

Method

Participants is Study 3 were the same as those in Study 2 (i.e., for the sake of clarity, we present these as separate studies). After Study 2 participants made judgments of the responses, we administered a free-recall task in which individuals wrote down as many responses as they could remember from the rating task. As in prior research by Liebrand, Messick, and Wolters (1986) the instructions read: "During this research you have rated 40 responses to incidents of dissatisfaction in relationships. We now ask you to write down as many responses as you can remember from the list." Participants were given 5 minutes to complete this task. As in several other studies (e.g., Liebrand et al., 1986) the lists of recalled behaviors for each participant were categorized by one of three individuals who were blind to the experimental hypotheses and goals (i.e., each individual coded roughly one-third of the total number of recalled responses). The coding was not difficult, because the wording of the recalled behaviors was generally very similar to the original wording. This may be so because participants had rated the items several times (e.g., judging constructiveness, frequency, extremity, and self–other prevalence), and because the delay between exposure and recall task was small. Accordingly, we did not obtain interrater reliability information for these ratings (in total, there were more than 1,100 recalled responses).

Results and discussion

Out of 40 behaviors, participants recalled an average of 14.07 behaviors. Recall of items was analyzed in a 2 (Item Valence: Constructive vs. Destructive responses) by 2 (Item Object: Self vs. Other behaviors) by 2 (Gender: Women vs. Men) ANOVA, with the former two variables represented as within-subject factors. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, this analysis revealed a main effect of Item Object, $F(1,81) = 62.2$, $p < .001$, indicating greater recall for items describing others' responses ($M = 8.01$, $SD = 2.78$) than for those describing own responses ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 2.39$). In addition, a main effect of Item Valence, $F(1,81) = 10.67$, $p < .005$, revealed that individuals recalled more items describing constructive responses (self plus other: $M = 7.55$, $SD = 2.92$) than items describing destructive responses (self plus other: $M = 6.52$, $SD =$

2.52): This finding is inconsistent with Hypothesis 4, which predicted greater recall for destructive items than for constructive items (we will consider this matter in the Discussion section).

Moreover, there was a significant interaction of Item Valence and Item Object, $F(1,81) = 8.55, p < .005$, revealing that participants recalled fewer destructive own responses ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.42$) than destructive other responses ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.60$; a mean difference of 1.38), whereas the discrepancy between recall of constructive own ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.63$) and constructive other responses ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.78$) was less pronounced (a mean difference of 0.57). This interaction is consistent with Hypothesis 3, which predicted that differences in recall for own and other responses would be more pronounced for destructive responses than for constructive responses.

Finally, an interaction of Gender and Item Valence, $F(1,81) = 4.37$, $p < .05$, revealed that the tendency to recall more constructive responses than destructive responses was greater among women (Ms = 7.80 vs. 6.16, SDs = 3.10 and 2.75; a mean difference of 1.64) than among men (Ms = 7.28 vs. 6.92, SDs = 2.71 and 2.19; a mean difference of 0.36). One may speculate that women more than men recall constructive responses because women are somewhat more likely than men to engage in constructive problem-solving in ongoing relationships (cf. Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Sprecher, 1992). Accordingly, constructive responses may be more self-descriptive for women than for men.

To summarize, recall was greater for (a) constructive responses than for destructive responses, and (b) for items listed by Study 1 participants as characteristic of others in their relationships (i.e., other responses), rather than items listed by Study 1 participants as characteristic of the self in their own relationships (i.e., own responses). Most importantly, others' destructive responses were recalled much better than one's own destructive responses, whereas differences between one's own and others' constructive responses were relatively small. This latter finding is congruent with the broader claim that others' responses (destructive responses in particular) are uncommon and infrequent (and therefore memorable), whereas one's own destructive responses are more common and frequent (and therefore less memorable).

General Discussion

The current research provides good evidence in support of the claim that perceptions of uniqueness and similarity underlie individuals' beliefs regarding their responses to incidents of dissatisfaction. Relevant to hypotheses involving the uniqueness bias, we found support for four specific predictions. Consistent with Hypotheses 1a and 1b, participants listed a greater number of constructive responses and fewer destructive responses in describing themselves than in describing others. Consistent with Hypothesis 1c, although destructive items describing oneself were not rated as more destructive than destructive items describing others, constructive items describing oneself were rated as more constructive than were constructive items describing others. And in support of Hypothesis 1d, constructive items were rated as more frequently performed by oneself than by others, whereas the opposite was observed for destructive items.

Consistent with the similarity bias (i.e., Hypothesis 2), items describing responses of oneself were rated as more frequent and less extreme than were items describing others' responses. Also, responses describing others were better recalled than were items describing one's own responses. And congruent with Hypothesis 3, ratings of constructiveness were the only solid predictor of beliefs regarding self–other prevalence of constructive responses, whereas ratings of constructiveness *and* ratings of frequency were significant predictors of beliefs regarding self–other prevalence of destructive responses. Finally, the current work provides partial evidence in support of Hypothesis 4. As predicted, constructive

responses were rated as more frequent and less extreme than were destructive responses. However, inconsistent with Hypothesis 4, constructive responses were better recalled than were destructive responses. Below, we briefly consider specific findings in light of underlying mechanisms and alternative explanations, and we review the theoretical and practical implications of the results.

How do we account for the simultaneous occurrence of the uniqueness and similarity biases? To begin with, we propose that at least in part, these biases can be understood by reference to the manner in which individuals process information about their own and others' relationships. In processing information regarding others' relationships, individuals may focus on specific information that is largely negative rather than positive (i.e., the negativity effect) and may focus on information that is infrequent or extreme rather than common (i.e., the extremity effect; e.g., Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Such information processing may result in a greater availability of destructive and extreme responses for other individuals. The finding that a relatively large number of destructive responses were generated and recalled for others is consistent with this reasoning. Moreover, findings regarding self–other prevalence suggest that there is a fair amount of agreement about the types of responses that characterize others, but not oneself.

Although the negativity and extremity effects presumably are pervasive, we propose that in the processing of information regarding one's own relationship, such tendencies may be overshadowed by cognitive filters that serve to sustain or improve a relatively favorable image of one's relationship. Most individuals presumably have developed fairly positive self-schemata, relatively stable and favorable beliefs about the self, which guide the processing of incoming information (cf. Taylor & Brown, 1988). Through such filters, information indicative of the positivity or appropriateness of one's responses may be welcomed, whereas information suggesting the negativity or inappropriateness of one's responses may be softened or denied. Given that such information concerns the self, the individual's ability to filter in such a manner is facilitated by the possession of knowledge regarding internal processes (e.g., underlying intentions, effort expenditure) and prior behavior (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). That is, whereas one's negative or extreme responses may be viewed in light of benign intentions or may be linked to positive responses in the past, such tendencies are less feasible in processing information regarding others' responses.

Are there alternative mechanisms that may help to explain the uniqueness and similarity biases observed in the current research? The availability of destructive responses enacted by others could be guided by preexisting stereotypes that come to mind when thinking about destructive responses (i.e., beliefs regarding a specific group of real or imaginary others who behave quite destructively during incidents of dissatisfaction; cf. Weinstein, 1980). Such stereotypes may be further stimulated by information conveyed via the mass media (e.g., TV talk shows, soap operas), which tend to focus on individuals who engage in rather negative and otherwise uncommon behaviors. In addition to stereotypes, it may also be that individuals intentionally focus on others who enact destructive and extreme responses (cf. downward comparison; Wills, 1991) or focus on specific domains of responses that allow them to maintain a relatively favorable image of their own responses (cf. dimensional comparison, Wood, 1989).

Moreover, Study 2 revealed some evidence in support of the claim that individuals assume greater similarity for destructive than for constructive responses (Hypothesis 3). In particular, correlational and regression analyses revealed that perceived constructiveness alone suffices in predicting beliefs regarding self–other prevalence of constructive responses, whereas both perceived constructiveness and frequency make unique and substantial contributions toward predicting beliefs regarding

self–other prevalence of destructive responses. This finding suggests that individuals justify or discount their own destructive behaviors by believing that such responses are common and occur frequently in others' relationships as well, thereby underlining the appropriateness and reasonableness of such undesirable behaviors (cf. Campbell, 1986; Goethals, 1986; Sherman et al., 1984). In contrast, the destructive responses typical of others are perceived as infrequent (and extreme); such views may be strengthened by some of the specific mechanisms outlined above (e.g., the extremity effect, stereotype salience, downward comparison, and dimensional comparison).

It is conceivable that, in addition to consensual validation, alternative mechanisms assumed to underlie the similarity bias can account for some of the current findings—the general occurrence of the similarity bias could follow from selective exposure, cognitive availability, focus of attention, and situational attribution (cf. Marks & Miller, 1987). However, the traditional formulations of such processes seem less capable of explaining (a) why the similarity and extremity biases coexist, and (b) why the similarity bias is relatively more pronounced for destructive responses. Nevertheless, these processes may be valid in the context of constructive and destructive responses in relationships, if one no longer assumes that these mechanisms necessarily lead to assumed similarity. Specifically, individuals may be selectively exposed to information about responses of others that are negative and otherwise extreme (e.g., selective exposure through mass media influences); instances of destructive responses enacted by others may come to mind relatively easily (i.e., cognitive availability does not necessarily imply that instances of similar responses are most salient); a focus on self could also serve as an anchor with which information about others is to be contrasted (i.e., noticing self-enhancing differences in addition to similarities); and, finally, situational attributions could be made in a self-enhancing manner (e.g., justifying own destructive responses and viewing them as fairly appropriate) or could be less feasible in interpreting others' responses (e.g., information regarding the context in which others' destructive and constructive responses take place may be limited).

Finally, Study 3 revealed greater recall for others' responses than for one's own responses, along with greater recall for one's own constructive responses than for one's own destructive responses. In accounting for these findings, it is useful to assume that several specific mechanisms may underlie recall abilities (cf. Stangor & McMillan, 1992). First, greater recall for others' responses than for one's own responses may be attributed to the fact that others' responses were rated as relatively less common and more extreme (cf. Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). However, recall also may have been influenced by individuals' globally benign views of relationship functioning, such that individuals remember those responses that are congruent with global expectations and beliefs (cf. Markus, 1977; Stangor & McMillan, 1992). In particular, this mechanism may account for the finding that individuals recalled a moderate number of their own constructive responses. Do those two mechanisms account for the finding that others' constructive behaviors were recalled at a level similar to that observed for one's own constructive behaviors or for others' destructive behaviors?

Perhaps recall is also influenced by a social comparison activity that has been termed *self-improvement*, in reference to the tendency to compare oneself to others who teach one how to perform better or who motivate one to improve (cf. Wood, 1989). Participants may have assigned greater attention to others' constructive responses because doing so would teach them how to deal with future incidents of dissatisfaction. The poor recall of one's own destructive responses may be explained by the fact that—relative to others' destructive responses—these responses were viewed as common and somewhat self-descriptive. Accordingly, these responses may be easily forgotten because they do not stand out as

exceptional or uncommon and because these somewhat self-descriptive responses are inconsistent with positive self-schemata. Finally, inspection of Table 1 suggests that there may be somewhat more overlap among the destructive responses (e.g., aggressive acts, ignoring the problem) than among the constructive responses, which may have reduced individuals' ability to recall destructive responses.

Two final issues deserve some brief discussion. First, consistent with predictions, destructive responses were rated as less frequent and more extreme than were constructive responses. This finding provides evidence in support of the basic assumptions underlying negativity and extremity effects (e.g., Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989), and demonstrates their robustness in the context of relationships. Second, throughout this article we employed the term "bias" to describe perceptions of uniqueness and similarity. However, most of the obtained findings can in fact be explained by assuming that individuals form and maintain fairly accurate beliefs (cf. Colvin & Block, 1994; Dawes, 1989). For example, it is not necessarily erroneous for most individuals to believe that they "hit the partner" less frequently than did others, assuming that some small minority of people hit their partners; assuming this to be the case, most people may accurately claim that they engage in such destructive responses less frequently than do others. An interesting implication following from this line of reasoning is that individuals may maintain relatively benign views of their relationships while simultaneously being fairly accurate. At least in part, incoming information concerning relatively uncommon and extreme forms of destructive behaviors may help individuals to maintain a feeling of superiority, whereas information concerning more ordinary or common forms of destructive behaviors may provide consensual validation for their own destructive responses. A potential threat to the well-being of relationships is that individuals may soften or to some degree "discount" their own destructive responses (e.g., other partners do exactly the same), whereas their partners are less likely to soften or discount such responses. A conceivable result of such discrepant interpretations is a metaconflict, or conflict regarding the conflict process itself, which may further contribute to the dissatisfaction. Indeed, metaconflicts have been argued to be an important source of contention and stress in close relationships (cf. Braiker & Kelley, 1979).

We wish to outline briefly some strengths and limitations of the current research. First, one limitation is that the current work provides little insight into precisely how and why individuals assume both uniqueness and similarity in their responses to dissatisfaction. Clearly, further research is needed to examine directly the roles of information-processing styles (e.g., in regard to the negativity and extremity effects as well as several social comparison activities). Also, we cannot rule out alternative explanations that emphasize the roles of person positivity (e.g., the self-as-a-person is compared to "a group" of same-sex others; cf. Sears, 1983) and social desirability. However, social desirability is unlikely to play an exceptionally important role, in that recent research has revealed that tendencies toward perceived superiority are not correlated with instruments assessing tendencies toward socially desirable responding (Rusbult, Van Lange, Verette, & Yovetich, 1996).

Second, the direction of causality between beliefs regarding self–other prevalence and perceived constructiveness and frequency is not clear. For example, do we believe that we perform destructive responses less frequently than do others because such behaviors are destructive and uncommon, or do we believe that such responses are destructive and uncommon because we do not perform such behaviors as frequently as others? Third, we have assumed that responses to dissatisfaction involve both universally and variably evaluated dimensions. While this assumption seems plausible, this claim remained untested in the current research.

Finally, our method of measuring similarity bias is somewhat unusual, and the absence of more commonly used measures does not facilitate careful comparison with prior work on similarity. Moreover, the frequency judgments may be guided by (a) the frequency with which dissatisfying events occur, and (b) the extent to which participants believe that others responded constructively or destructively to a given dissatisfying event (see note 3). At the same time, we believe that research on the similarity bias may profit from less commonly used operationalizations that focus on individuals' perceptions of commonness, deviance, and appropriateness—constructs delineating judgments that are central in the Ross et al. (1977) definition of "false consensus."

One important strength of the current research concerns the multifaceted methodology that included the generation of items (Study 1), judgment of items (Study 2), and recall of items (Study 3) describing constructive and destructive responses believed to be performed by oneself or others. One advantage of this approach is that such items are more likely to be central to individuals' understanding of their behavior than are items generated by the experimenter. Moreover, by using Study 2 participants as external judges, we obtained a fairly unobtrusive measure of uniqueness and similarity; the recall measure seems similarly unobtrusive. Also, it is worth noting that these findings were observed among Dutch participants, thereby complementing prior research on social-cognitive processes in relationships, which by and large has been conducted in the United States.

Conclusion

The current work illustrates that two seemingly contradictory beliefs—uniqueness and similarity biases—coexist, enabling individuals to sustain the general, self-enhancing belief that one is "uniquely better than others but otherwise perfectly normal." The similarity bias ("being perfectly normal") seems pertinent in understanding how individuals may regard and justify behaviors that are potentially harmful to the well-being of a relationship.

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